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SUBJECT: AUSTRIAN MEDIA HIGHLIGHTS: March 11, 2008

President Meets SPOe, OeVP Leaders

¶1. All Austrian media report that President Heinz Fischer invited the leaders of the government coalition, Chancellor Alfred Gusenbauer (SPOe) and Vice-Chancellor Wilhelm Molterer (OeVP), to talks at the Hofburg yesterday, in an attempt to resolve the current political deadlock. Details of the meeting have not been made public at this point, but undoubtedly the President urged Gusenbauer and Molterer to improve cooperation, the media suggest. The President "is trying to save the coalition," one Austrian daily headlines. Still, despite Fischer's efforts, and although the OeVP is not expected to table a motion in Parliament this week on bringing forward the general elections after all, many political analysts believe the question is no longer if, but when early elections will be held.

All Austrian media report that in an "effort to save the coalition," as liberal daily Der Standard says, President Heinz Fischer invited Chancellor Gusenbauer and Vice-Chancellor Molterer to the Hofburg for "closed door" talks on the government deadlock. On ORF radio early morning news Morgenjournal, political analyst Emmerich Talos says like many observers he expects the general elections scheduled for 2010 will be brought forward: "There is no way for the SPOe to back down from its demand for tax cuts; the rift between the Social Democrats and the People's Party has become so deep there is no way to close it any longer. (...) Even if early elections before the summer are not an option, the alienation between the SPOe and the OeVP has reached a level that makes it highly unlikely, in my view, for the two parties to reach a compromise in fall on the key topics, such as tax reform or healthcare reform. (...) I believe there were problems between the two parties from the word go, (...) and fair words won't help if the coalition partners cannot find common ground to work on."

Meanwhile, in an interview with semi-official daily Wiener Zeitung, political analyst Peter Hajek suggests that early elections "would have only one winner, the FPOe." The Lower Austrian provincial election "should have the SPOe's alarm bells ringing." Currently, only one party can be "certain of victory, should the general elections be brought forward, and that is the FPOe. (...) For the two major parties, the SPOe and the OeVP, an early vote would constitute an incalculable risk."

FPOe Rejects Support of a Minority Government

¶2. FPOe leader Heinz-Christian Strache has said his party will not play the role of supporter of a minority government in Parliament if the SPOe-OeVP governing coalition collapses. He left open the question of the party's vote on a motion to dissolve the government

and hold an early general election, but he added that FPOe MPs might vote for it. Strache asserted that OeVP support of an early election after its resounding victory Sunday in Upper Austria's provincial election would constitute "a transparent, tactical game." He declared the FPOe would be ready to enter into a governing coalition after an early election, arguing that "another grand coalition with the same old faces," would be "a bad joke. The political dinosaurs," Strache claimed, had already failed and needed to be replaced, says semi-official daily Wiener Zeitung.

Al Qaeda Allegedly Holding 2 Austrians Hostage

¶3. The militant group "al Qaeda in Islamic North Africa," a branch of terrorist network al Qaeda, is claiming it has taken hostage two Austrian tourists in Tunisia. In a message broadcast on al Jazeera television, the group said they had kidnapped the two Austrians on February 22, and that they are "in good health." The group is expected to come forward with conditions for the Austrian man and woman's release soon, al Jazeera suggests. Meanwhile, the Austrian Foreign Ministry has explained the audiotape is currently being analyzed, but it has not confirmed the hostage taking at this point. The al Qaeda group reportedly said the kidnapping was in retribution for Western cooperation with Israel.

With regard to the two Austrian tourists, who -- according to Arab TV network al Jazeera -- were taken hostage by al Qaeda in Tunisia in February, Foreign Ministry spokesperson Peter Launsky-Tieffenthal confirmed on ORF radio's early morning news Morgenjournal that the video message was currently being analyzed. The "safety of the two alleged hostages" remains at the top of the Ministry's agenda, the spokesperson added. Centrist daily Die Presse in its report points out that North Africa is increasingly turning into a preferred region for dangerous Islamic groups. The organization "al Qaeda in Islamic North Africa" has succeeded in pooling these forces, the daily says. In an interview with the newspaper, Islam expert Rolf Tophoven says the group is "aiming at toppling the moderate governments in the region. Pro-Western countries like Tunisia and Morocco are their prime targets." At this early stage, "it is extremely difficult to say what the group might want to accomplish with the kidnapping. A large-scale attempt at blackmailing the Austrian government seems unlikely, as there are no big politically motivated demands they kidnappers could make. Because of its low profile with regard to fighting terrorism Austria is not a prime focus of Al Qaeda." Thus, the kidnapping of tourists "always also targets the tourist industry as a source of revenue. The terrorists' underlying strategy is to weaken the countries concerned."

Bomb Attacks in Pakistan

¶4. At least 15 people have been killed bomb blasts in Lahore in Pakistan. One explosion occurred outside the police headquarters, and the second bomb attack was in a mainly residential neighborhood, according to ORF radio early morning news Morgenjournal.

Obama Dismissed Double Ticket Hints

¶5. Democratic presidential hopeful Barack Obama has dismissed the idea of becoming Hillary Clinton's running mate in the US presidential election. In recent days the Clinton campaign has repeatedly suggested a "dream ticket" combining the two Democratic Party candidates might be a possibility. However, Obama said the proposal made no sense because he was ahead in the race: "I'm not running for Vice-President, I am running for President of the United States of America," Austrian media quote. Clinton and Obama are gearing up for Tuesday's primary in Mississippi, the latest in the battle for the Democratic Party nomination, ORF online news writes.

UN Criticizes Israeli Housing Plan

¶6. UN Secretary General Ban Ki-Moon has called on Israel to stop plans to build hundreds of new homes in the occupied West Bank: "Any settlement expansion is contrary to Israel's obligations under the road map and to international law." The Secretary General called on

the government of Israel to "halt settlement expansion" and reiterated that the "fulfillment of road map obligations by both parties is an important measure underpinning the political process between them." Meanwhile, US President George Bush has said he is sending Vice-President Dick Cheney to the Middle East next week, in a renewed effort to encourage the Israeli-Palestinian peace process, says ORF online news.

Kilner